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Senate acts to plug security leaks

By Terry Atlas
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WASHINGTON—In an effort to repair a severely strained relationship with the CIA, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has begun a crackdown on leaks of classified information concerning Central America, Senate sources said Wednesday.

Senators have promised to police their staffs and themselves in an effort to put a stop to a series of leaks that began when the CIA became significantly involved in the problems of Central America. Those leaks confirm CIA fears that Congress cannot keep a secret at a time when the lawmakers want more credibility with the CIA.

The committee, which a month ago was in an uproar about not being fully informed of U.S. covert activities in Central America, has promised to keep a tighter rein on itself if CIA Director William Casey will be more forthcoming with details of covert activities.

THIS EFFORT to improve relations between Capitol Hill and the spy agency resembles a covert operation itself, with staff members tight-lipped about what the watchdog committee is doing to police itself and safeguard CIA secrets.

In general, though, "there is a real effort by the senators to stop leaks by themselves and their staffs," an aide to one committee member said.

As one step in that process, Senate sources confirmed, committee Chairman Barry Goldwater [R., Ariz.] and Vice Chairman Daniel Moynihan [D., N.Y.] delivered a classified handwritten note to the Senate leadership, asking Republican leader Howard Baker [Tenn.] and Democrat Robert Byrd [W.Va.] to remind all senators that disclosure of classified information is a violation of Senate rules and subject to disciplinary action.

The relationship between the CIA and intelligence committees of the House and Senate deteriorated when sources believed close to the committee leaked several major antiadministration stories about CIA activities in Central America, including details of the CIA-directed mining of Nicaragua's harbors.

CASEY IS KNOWN to regard the Hill as a sieve for secrets. On occasion, the CIA has purposely varied details of its reports to the House and Senate intelligence committees to try to identify the sources of the leaks.

As part of the committee effort to reassure the CIA about committee discretion, the classified letter itself was leaked and portrayed as a rebuke to Sen. Jesse Helms [R., N.C.], who isn't even a member of the committee.

Baker declined to discuss the letter Wednesday, but one Republican aide said his understanding was that Helms was mentioned by name only when Moynihan and Goldwater delivered the letter. And it was unclear why the letter itself, which apparently contains no classified information, was classified by the committee.

Helms last week charged on the Senate floor that the CIA had used covert measures to aid the campaign of José Napoleón Duarte, a moderate who won the runoff presidential election in El Salvador. Subsequently, the administration acknowledged that the CIA had indirectly funneled money, reportedly \$2 million, to moderate Salvadoran political parties and other groups.

SOME INTELLIGENCE Committee Democrats were described as annoyed that a conservative Republican was publicly raising such a sensitive matter at a time when they had agreed to keep their disagreements over controversial CIA matters behind closed doors.

And the Reagan administration was angered that Helms, who supported right-wing Salvadoran candidate Roberto d'Aubuisson, damaged the credibility of the Salvadoran election by charging "the State Department and the CIA bought the election for Duarte."

Helms Wednesday strongly denied using classified information and said Senate Democrats were trying to make him an issue in order to aid his Democratic rival in the hotly contested North Carolina Senate race, Gov. James Hunt.

A Helms aide, who spoke on condition she not be named, said the senator got his information from public sources in the U.S. and El Salvador, and she said he did not break any rules governing classified information.

"He rejects and he resents the allegation, which is absolutely false," the aide said. "He has never in his life leaked any classified information and did not in this case. Nothing he said on the Senate floor came from a classified briefing from either the Senate Intelligence Committee or from the CIA or from any classified source."

Helms said he hasn't seen the letter, and it is "appalling" that the Intelligence Committee apparently is making an example of him after committee members themselves leaked so much previously.

"It's clearly a political trick," his aide said, pointing to Moynihan's role in the New York Committee to Elect Jim Hunt. Moynihan has authorized use of his name on fund-raising letters for the group, a Moynihan staffer confirmed.

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